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RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 1300  
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SUBJECT: TRIBES OF TURKMENISTAN

11. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

12. (SBU) SUMMARY: Notwithstanding 70 years of Soviet rule, tribalism remains a potent issue of potential division in Turkmenistan. One's tribal identity continues to influence who one will marry, whether one will enter the university or whether one can get a government job. Under former President Niyazov, the Ahal Teke tribe -- Niyazov's tribe, based in Ashgabat and Ahal Province -- not only dominated Turkmenistan's political structure, but also was the main beneficiary of Niyazov's Ashgabat-focused construction and economic development program. While the Ahal Teke continue to dominate the government under President Berdimuhamedov, the president seems to recognize that the former policy of economic favoritism was a recipe for instability and is seeking to address some of the worst economic inequities. END SUMMARY.

#### TRIBAL DEMARCATION OF TURKMENISTAN

13. (SBU) All ethnic Turkmen belong to one of Turkmenistan's approximately 30 tribes. The Teke, Yomut, and Ersari tribes are the largest of these, and they account for the majority of the Turkmen population. Among these, the Teke tribe -- the largest -- is divided between the Ahal Teke and Mary Teke. The second-largest tribe is the Yomut, with divisions between the Balkan Yomuts in western Turkmenistan and the Dashoguz Yomuts in northern Turkmenistan. The Ersari, the third-largest tribe, inhabits the eastern province of Lebap. (NOTE: While this characterization is convenient, it is also based on fact, since Turkmenistan's provinces were delineated based on the territories of the three major tribes. END NOTE.) The minor tribes include Gokleng, Chowdur, Saryk, Sakar, Salir, Salor, Bayat, Alili, and the Ata. Although every tribe has its own ancestor, Niyazov imposed the idea of a single mythical ancestor, Oguz Khan, in order to promote a point of convergence among the Turkmen tribes.

14. (SBU) Tribal identity plays a major role in determining the life of the average Turkmen. Traditionally, every tribe has striven to maintain the purity of its lineage, leading to great pressure for children to marry within their tribe. This practice continues to prevail in most parts of the country. For example, parents of a former (Ahal Teke) Embassy employee were upset with his choice of bride, an Ersari. Even after nine years of a very happy marriage,

the parents' resentment is still palpable, the employee claimed. Similarly, another (Yomut) Embassy employee, whose two sisters married Ahal Teke men, said that her parents were disinclined to approve their daughters' marriages, because they did not want to see their children treated as second-class members of an Ahal Teke family. Indeed, minority tribes are less opposed to intertribal marriages between themselves than they are to marriages with Ahal Tekes, who are viewed as arrogant and superior.

15. (SBU) Tribal origin can also influence one's career. For instance, the official Turkmen language is based on the Ahal and Mary Teke dialects. A strong knowledge of this "official" dialect is a prerequisite for a high-level government position. For example, a 27 year-old Ersari man from Turkmenabat City, who currently works in a low-level government position in Ashgabat, told one Embassy employee that he almost exclusively speaks Russian at work. This way, he confessed, he gets more respect, since he does not have to cover up his Turkmenabat accent.

#### TRIBAL CONFLICT UNDER SOVIET UNION

16. (SBU) Before the Soviets unified the Turkmen tribes into the Soviet Turkmen Republic, the main source of conflict was over land and water distribution. During the Soviet era, however, the tribal conflict evolved into the question of who holds power. Aware that the Ahal Teke was the largest tribe and wanting to avoid fanning tribal tensions, Moscow instituted a policy of "tribal parity." The main objective of this policy was to guarantee all groups equal access to administrative positions and economic benefits. Consistent with this policy, many members of minority tribes were sent to Russia for education and recruited to government positions. When appointing the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party in Turkmenistan, Moscow also introduced a policy of

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rotating the position among the tribes. Thus, while the First Secretary from 1947 to 1951, Shaja Batyrov, was Ahal Teke, his

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successor, Suhan Babayev, was Alili (1951-1958). First Secretary Juma Garayev (1958-1960) was Teke; Balysh Ovezov (1960-1969) was Yomut; Muhammetnazar Gapurov (1969-1985) was Ersari; and Saparmurat Niyazov (1985-1991) was Ahal Teke. Despite these efforts to share power, however, the power rested with the Ahal Tekes, the most educated and influential of all the tribes.

#### THE DOMINANT AHAL TEKE TRIBE

17. (SBU) Three major factors accounted for the Ahal Teke tribe's leadership. First, Tekes were at the forefront of the military resistance to Persian and Russian incursions in the nineteenth century, which allowed them to portray themselves as patriots. Second, Tekes were under direct Russian colonial rule since the 1880s, much earlier than the Dashoguz Yomuts and Lebap Ersaris. This enabled Tekes to become more familiar with the Russian culture, language, and government operations, giving them an advantage as they competed for high-level government positions. Lastly, Ashgabat, predominantly an Ahal Teke city, became the new republic's capital. (NOTE: After Moscow realized that having Ashgabat as the capital would enhance the already-influential Tekes, it officially decided to relocate the capital to Charzhow City (now Turkmenabat) in Lebap Province. However, the Soviets never implemented the decision to relocate the capital because of the bureaucratic hassle involved, and Ashgabat remained the capital city. END NOTE.)

#### NIYAZOV AND TRIBALISM

18. (U) The first president, Saparmyrat Niyazov adopted a manipulative policy towards the tribal issue. On the one hand, he publicly admitted the existence of conflict among tribes. For example, during his January 2006 Memorial Day speech honoring the victims of the 1881 Gokdepe Battle, Niyazov acknowledged the existence of tribal tensions and called for their end. As a symbol of the tribes' unification in Turkmenistan, he called for more intertribal marriages. On the other hand, with his program of economic development and construction focused primarily in Ashgabat

and Ahal province -- the areas where the Ahal Teke dominate -- Niyazov neglected other provinces, creating discontent among other tribes, especially the Dashoguz Yomuts and Lebap Ersaris. (NOTE: Due to their different historic experiences, the dialects, traditions, and lifestyles of these two tribes differ more from the Teke than those of any other minor tribes. Dashoguz Yomuts were part of Khiva, while the Ersaris were part of Bukhara -- both Uzbek khanates. Because of this, Tekes and other Turkmen tribes perceive Dashoguz Yomuts and Ersaris as being Uzbeks -- or, at least, semi-Uzbeks. END NOTE.) Thus Dashoguz Yomuts and Ersaris, in addition to already being significantly different from the other tribes, also found themselves more neglected and isolated under Niyazov's rule.

WHO IS BERDIMUHAMEDOV?

¶9. (SBU) President Berdimuhamedov is continuing to show the same tribal favoritism (towards the Tekes) as his predecessor. Like Niyazov, Berdimuhamedov is an Ahal Teke. Moreover, he comes from Gokdepe District, where the famous Battle of Gokdepe between Turkmen and Russians took place in 1881. Because this battle took place specifically in Gokdepe, where resistance to Russian rule was the strongest, the Gokdepe Tekes consider themselves the core of the Teke tribe. Thus, the President of Turkmenistan comes not only from the Teke tribe that holds both political and economic power, but also from Gokdepe, the heart of the Teke tribe. Moreover, within Turkmenistan's Cabinet of Ministers (all of whom were appointed by Berdimuhamedov), four out of seven deputy chairmen (i.e., deputy premiers) come from the Ahal Teke tribe. In addition, Parliamentary Speaker Akja Nurberdiyeva is also an Ahal Teke. On a ministerial level, 18 out of 22 ministers are Ahal Teke. As a result, Ahal Tekes continue to dominate the political arena, and there is only a very slim chance of getting a leading government post if an individual is not Ahal Teke.

¶10. (SBU) This favoritism is also manifested in other sectors,

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including education. Although universities and colleges are free in Turkmenistan, each university department has a quota of how many students from each province it can accept. For example, when an Embassy contact from Dashoguz Province applied to study in the foreign languages department at the Turkmen National Institute of World Languages, there were only two slots available for Dashoguz applicants. Similarly, two slots were available for Lebap, Balkan, and Mary provincial applicants. However, the joint quota for Ahal province and Ashgabat was twelve slots.

TRIBAL ISSUE UNDER BERDIMUHAMEDOV

¶11. (SBU) Notwithstanding the dominance of Ahal Tekes in his cabinet, Berdimuhamedov has yet to define his policy on tribal issues. Yet, he has undertaken some serious steps that have led many to hope for fairer treatment for all tribes. For example, the candidates for the February 2007 presidential election were chosen from five different tribes. Although it was clear that these candidates were hand-picked and that Berdimuhamedov would win the elections, the fact that they represented different tribes made a significant impact on ethnic Turkmen. Since his inauguration, Berdimuhamedov has also ordered construction of new schools, hospitals, stadiums, hotels, kindergartens, and other similar establishments in all provinces. In July, the president announced establishment of a new free economic zone in Balkan Province's Turkmenbashi City. This plan will help develop a Yomut-dominated region. However, Dashoguz, Lebap, and Mary provinces continue to struggle economically, and it remains to be seen whether the president eventually will also seek to promote economic development in those provinces as well.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Tribalism continues to remain a potential flashpoint for tension within Turkmenistan. Resentments over tribal discrimination, both perceived and real, have built up for centuries, and have been exacerbated by the lack of economic development and former President Niyazov's policies. That said, most minority tribes seem willing to accept Ahal Teke political domination -- at least, for now -- as long as it does not lead to

continued economic neglect.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT CONTINUED: The fact that President Berdimuhamedov seems to recognize this and to be responding to the economic inequities is a point in his favor. But tribal traditions still run strong in Turkmenistan, and many still prioritize family and tribe above any concept of national identity. Even if the president succeeds in bringing economic development -- and increased employment -- to all provinces, he may find creating a nation a tough task.

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